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Yugoslavia: Bitterly Divided Serbia Faces Elections [REDACTED]

Summary

Serbia's first post-World War II multi-party elections on 9 December almost certainly will exacerbate fundamental divisions within the republic and Yugoslavia. Although republic strongman Slobodan Milosevic has a chance of retaining the presidency, nationalist opposition parties appear poised to defeat the Communists in parliamentary contests, despite Communist efforts to rig them. Regardless of the winner, the election probably will contribute to the centrifugal forces within Yugoslavia by putting an even more markedly nationalistic Serbian government in place, aggravating tensions between Communists and anti-Communists in Serbia, and making progress on a new confederal arrangement which could save Yugoslav unity an even more remote possibility. There is also a possibility that Serbia will see the first open effort to nullify an election--Milosevic may try to stir ethnic conflicts or unrest to trigger a military intervention and overturn the election results if he loses. The elections also will raise temperatures in Kosovo--the large Albanian majority there plans to boycott the voting. [REDACTED]

This typescript was prepared by [REDACTED] Office of European Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to [REDACTED]

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DISCUSSION

The Elections

Elections in Serbia and neighboring Montenegro on 9 December (with runoffs in Serbia on 23 December) will complete the process of selecting the leaders who will have to settle Yugoslavia's fate in coming months. The key race will be in Serbia, where voters will decide representation in the 250-seat republic assembly and select the republic president. Voters in Serbia "proper" will choose 160 delegates while the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina will elect 34 and 56 respectively. A first round victory will require a plurality of at least 25 percent of registered voters and a turnout of at least 50 percent in a voting district. The number of presidential contenders exceeds 30, but only two are serious--Communist Slobodan Milosevic and Serbian nationalist Vuk Draskovic.

The Contenders

Only a few of the 54 registered political parties will figure significantly in the final results. They are:

- The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). The renamed Communists are trying to exploit the advantages of a ruling party but appear to have little popular support, [REDACTED] The SPS combines ideological hostility to economic reform with appeals to ethnic nationalism. Their best hope is that party head Milosevic remains popular and may have some coattails.
- The Serbian Renewal Movement (SRM). Led by the increasingly popular Vuk Draskovic--Milosevic's main competition for the presidency--the SRM appeals to nationalist and anti-Communist sentiments and insists Serbia must protect its co-nationals in other republics. It wants a strong federation or an independent Serbia rather than a loose confederation like that proposed by Slovenia and Croatia. [REDACTED] a groundswell of support for Draskovic and the SRM seems to be building.
- The Democratic Party (DP). Formed by intellectuals, the DP combines liberal democratic ideals with a relatively restrained form of nationalism. The DP probably has little appeal for the working man but could poll well among educated Serbs.

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- The Peasants' Party (PP). The PP defends the interests of the small-scale farmers who dominate Yugoslav agriculture. It could win a large share of votes in the largely agricultural province of Vojvodina. [REDACTED]

Notably lacking on the election registers are any of the parties formed by the 90-percent Albanian majority in Kosovo. The Albanian opposition is boycotting the voting to avoid giving legitimacy to Serbia's abolition of Kosovo's autonomous status and to its violations of human rights in the province, [REDACTED]. A coalition of eight opposition parties in Vojvodina also says it will boycott the race because it opposes Serbia's abolition of provincial autonomy. [REDACTED]

Two-Party Race for the Presidency

The leading contenders in the presidential race are Communist strongman Slobodan Milosevic and SRP leader Vuk Draskovic. Milosevic combines Serbian nationalism with opposition to market-oriented economic reform and vocal defense of working-class interests such as job protection. Draskovic also appeals to ethnic nationalism and anti-Communism, but has no economic program beyond vague support for a market economy. [REDACTED]

Draskovic's popularity has surged and the race appears increasingly close, but Milosevic still holds many advantages of incumbency and has only recently geared up his campaign. Milosevic gets widespread and positive coverage of his campaign from his tightly controlled media, which either ignores Draskovic or reports negatively on him. [REDACTED]

Nationalism has been Milosevic's strongest card--many observers in Belgrade believe that he would be prepared to stir ethnic unrest and violence to rally Serbs to his banner if he believes his victory is in doubt. This has been effective in the past, but Milosevic has never had to compete against a real opponent--and certainly not one that can claim the nationalist label as well as Milosevic himself. If Milosevic emerges victorious, he will be bucking a trend which has brought nationalists to power elsewhere in Yugoslavia. [REDACTED]

We believe that free and fair voting would give a majority of assembly seats from Serbia proper and Vojvodina to Draskovic's SRM and allied anti-Communist parties. Efforts by the Communists to manipulate the campaign already have tainted the election process, however. Milosevic has used his iron grip on the media--built through an ongoing series of purges of journalists and editors--to smear the opposition parties, [REDACTED]. Opposition organizers have reported [REDACTED] many incidents of harassment by regime officials. [REDACTED]

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The opposition's successful bid last week to force regime acceptance of multiparty vote monitoring and counting, however, dramatically cuts chances that the Communists can manipulate actual voting. An opposition pledge to boycott the elections and to stage a massive anti-regime rally--a move that Draskovic publicly warned could lead to civil war between Serbs--forced the Serbian Assembly to amend the election law to allow multiparty election supervision. The reversal was a stinging defeat for Milosevic since the Assembly, at his urging, had voted down the amendments the week before. [REDACTED]

No reliable data exist on voter preferences in Serbia because the Milosevic government has outlawed publication of pre-election polls. Communists have polled no more than 25 percent of the votes in any of the earlier elections in other republics. The Serbian Communists probably have lost considerable credibility because of their efforts to rig the contest--a tack tried by no other republic Communist party. Most Serbs probably would view a Communist victory in the legislative race as proof of fraud, and street protests that could mushroom into violent confrontations with police would be likely. [REDACTED]

Implications

Results Probably Will Speed Yugoslav Disintegration. The Serbian elections are highly unlikely to produce a government capable of striking a bargain with the independence-minded Slovenes and Croats saving the Yugoslav federation, no matter who comes out on top. All major Serbian parties reject the loose confederation model that Slovenia and Croatia say is the only alternative to breakup. Slovene leaders now say publicly and privately that they have no common ground with either the Serbian opposition or Communists, and are planning to hold a referendum on independence by mid-January. Croatia is likely to reach the same conclusions once the elections are over and the victors publicly reiterate their rejection of confederation. A badly divided Serbia, for its part--particularly if confronted by major post-election unrest in Kosovo--might be so distracted by internal problems that it would accept with little protest secession by other republics. [REDACTED]

Senior Yugoslav military leaders, who have warned publicly that they are prepared to act unilaterally to save Yugoslav unity, probably will view almost any result as bad news for the country. On balance, the Army likely would prefer a Milosevic victory for president, although various sources suggest the military command dislikes Milosevic's divisive appeals to nationalism. It almost certainly would see an opposition victory for parliament as another step toward Yugoslavia's dissolution but probably would reluctantly accept the results if the streets remain calm. Even a Communist win, however, if accompanied by popular unrest, could provoke the Army to crack down to maintain peace, as could an Albanian protests against the election results in Kosovo. [REDACTED]

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Cement Domestic Divisions in Serbia. Regardless of who wins, Serbia itself will emerge from the election in a deeper state of internal division and crisis than that faced by any other republic. The Communists have fought democratization fiercely, and the rough campaign is likely to leave in its wake deep bitterness between the Communists and most other parties. By contrast, the Communists in Slovenia and Croatia proved relatively gracious losers and have worked out a modus vivendi with the new rulers. [REDACTED]

A divided government--an opposition-controlled legislature and Milosevic as president--would augur badly for ongoing political stability in Belgrade. The opposition has pledged to rewrite the Milosevic-inspired constitution that gives the president near-dictatorial powers, including the right to dissolve the assembly. Milosevic's past record suggests he would resist, and he probably would be tempted to exploit his working class power base to undermine a democratically elected government. There is a slim chance, however, that Milosevic--a crafty politician--and his opposition might construct a common program based on Serbian nationalism, iron-fisted control of Kosovo, and the defence of Serb interests in other republics. [REDACTED]

An SRM sweep in the presidential contest and the parliamentary race would minimize the chances of conflict between the president on the one side and the parliament and government on the other but could prompt the ousted Communists to foment worker unrest. Milosevic, for his part, might refuse to accept the results and find a pretext to declare a state of emergency--a power granted him by his new constitution. [REDACTED]

And Do Nothing to Deal with Other Problems. The election will leave unresolved the fundamental and explosive conflict between Serbs and Albanians for control of Kosovo. Most Albanians will refuse to accept the legitimacy of Serbian rule no matter who holds the reins in Belgrade, and the de facto--if self-imposed--exclusion of the Albanians from the electoral process almost certainly will deepen their alienation. A victory by Draskovic's extremist nationalist party might drive them to desperation and increase the chances of a popular Albanian insurrection in Kosovo. [REDACTED]

Serbia's economy also is in deep trouble and is likely to cause trauma for any new regime. Milosevic has used profligate bailouts, wage increases, and even inter-republic tariffs to maintain his power base among industrial workers, and the bill is coming due. According to the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, 47.5 percent of Serbian workers are employed by loss-making firms, and Serbia accounts for more than 40 percent of all business losses in Yugoslavia. If the opposition forms the next government, it will

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have to grapple with these inherited economic problems and could face Communist-organized street resistance from workers who will bear the brunt of corrective policies. [REDACTED]

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